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Confident, focused and connected: The importance of mentoring for women's career development in the events industry

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Abstract

The events industry is female-dominated numerically, yet men continue to occupy the majority of senior roles and positions of influence. A variety of factors contribute to this persistent glass ceiling, including shortage of female role models, lack of confidence, inflexible working hours, and limited professional networks. Mentoring has been shown to begin to address some of these challenges women may face in progressing to senior positions. This paper reports on research conducted on a formal industry-wide mentoring programme for women that aims to pair female professionals with leading industry figures in a supportive, collaborative and focused programme of development activities. Drawing on data from 37 interviews with mentees on the programme, conducted over the course of one year, the article considers if and how mentoring can help empower women in the events industry to aim high and proactively advance their careers. Findings suggest that mentoring can have positive effects on women's confidence, ability to plan professionally, and build supportive and enabling networks. The study shows the value of a structured, formal programme for mentoring activities and suggests that, although mentoring alone will not redress gender inequality in the events industry, it provides a valuable and effective mechanism for individual career development and empowerment.

Keywords

Career development; confidence; gender; goal setting; mentoring; networking

Introduction

The events industry is worth an estimated £42.3 billion to the UK economy, and supports 570,000 full-time equivalent jobs (Booker, 2016). Although exact figures are unavailable, anecdotal evidence suggests that this is a female-dominated industry in numerical terms, with

women making up between 60-70% of employees in total but less than 20% of senior management and board positions (Exhibitor Smarts, 2016). A glass ceiling persists within the industry, as it does across the economy more broadly, and this has become a popular topic of discussion in industry press, at conferences and at meetings. A variety of reasons have been put forward to try to explain this persistent gender imbalance, ranging from issues with maternity and childcare, to long and inflexible working patterns, shortage of female role models, and lack of ambition on behalf of women in the events industry (see Meetpie, 2012; Dashper, 2013; Association of Women in Events, 2015). Although some (usually men) suggest that there are no gender issues in the industry and that '[t]here are plenty of opportunities out there for women who want them' (Clayton, 2016), there is broad recognition that there is some gender inequality in the sector and that this is undesirable – for women and for the events industry more broadly.

Gender barriers in the workplace are deep-rooted and have proven remarkably difficult to breakdown (Weyer, 2007). Gender inequality is related to structural barriers - such as the organisation of work around the ideal masculine model that rewards uninterrupted careers and supposes an individual is free to dedicate themselves to work before all else (Acker, 1990; Wood & Newton, 2006; Billing, 2011); cultural barriers - such as continued expectations that women will be primarily responsible for unpaid caring within families (Friedman, 2015); economic barriers - such as the high costs of childcare; social barriers - such as the persistence of the importance of old boys' networks and business practices that subtly marginalise women (Benschop, 2009); and, the widespread acceptance of gender stereotypes that limit ideas of what women should and can do (Heilman, 2001). Progress has certainly been made over the last 40 years, but gender inequality and discrimination persist. Many forms of discrimination are so ingrained and subtle that people often do not recognise gender inequity in their own workplaces and careers, even though they are able to identify its existence more broadly (Kelan, 2009). However, concrete outcomes of gender discrimination are difficult to ignore. The gender pay gap in the UK remains at 9.4% for full time employees (ONS, 2016) and women are under-represented at senior levels across a variety of sectors (Perrault, 2015). There is thus widespread acceptance that some level of gender inequality persists in the UK labour market, and that action may be needed to remedy this situation.

Different solutions have been proposed to try to rectify gender inequality, ranging from the use of quotas for company boards, to women's leadership programmes, and improved support for flexible working (Dahlerup & Friedenvall, 2005; Atkinson & Hall, 2009). Mentoring is one such initiative that is increasingly supported as a means to empower and enable women to succeed in senior management and leadership. Mentoring is a "relationship between a person with advanced experience and knowledge and a more junior person who seeks assistance, guidance and support for their career, personal and professional development" (Fowler et al., 2007, p.666). Mentoring has been shown to produce positive career outcomes for both men and women (Bozionelos et al., 2016). However, women may struggle to access influential mentors informally and so formal mentoring programmes may be particularly important for guiding, supporting and developing women's careers, and may be one tool in attempts to redress gender inequality.

This paper reports on findings from a study of a formal women's mentoring programme in the events industry. Based on the premise that gender inequality does persist in the industry, and that women do often encounter a glass ceiling in reaching more senior and influential

positions, the programme pairs a senior industry leader (male or female) with a more junior woman in order to achieve negotiated goals over the course of a year. This paper uses interviews with mentees involved in the programme in order to consider if and how such an initiative may support and empower participants within their careers. The paper begins with a discussion of mentoring and its potential role in tackling gender inequality, before discussing the methods of the study. Drawing on interview data conducted over the course of the one year programme, the ways in which mentoring has supported the participants in developing their confidence, improving goal setting, and networking are presented. The discussion considers the benefits of such mentoring programmes for women's personal career development, and the limitations of solutions focused on individual women for solving the broader problem of continued gender inequality in the events industry.

Gender and mentoring

Mentoring is a well-established tool to support career development, with those who have been mentored out-performing those who have not, even long after the mentoring relationship has ended (Chao, 1997; Fagenson-Eland et al., 1997). Mentoring provides support for protégés in two key areas: career support, such as sponsorship, exposure and coaching; and psychosocial support, such as role modelling, confirmation and counselling (Kram, 1985). Mentoring can be formal or informal, but women may struggle more than men to access an influential mentor informally as, due to persistent gender power relations in organisations, there are still fewer women in senior positions, and junior women may be less comfortable approaching a senior male for informal support (Ragins, 1996; Elliot et al., 2011). This can be a disadvantage for women, as to gain maximum benefit, mentors should be an influential senior figure with experience, ability and commitment to supporting upward mobility of protégés, and these individuals are often men (Booth, 1996; Ramaswami et al., 2010). Therefore formal mentoring programmes may be particularly important for women in providing access to influential mentors and associated benefits in terms of personal and career development (O'Brien et al., 2008).

Mentoring can be transformative, providing mentees with space, time and support to reflect on their careers, goals and ambition (Headlam-Wells et al., 2005). However, it can also be disastrous when relationships break down or mentors do not support, even sometimes actively sabotage, the career development of the protégé (Eby et al., 2000). A variety of factors can lead to poor mentoring outcomes, including lack of time, poor planning, unsuccessful pairing of participants, and lack of understanding about the process (Tolar, 2012).

To be effective, mentoring relationships need to be carefully planned, managed and monitored. Formal mentoring programmes offer opportunities for such management and evaluation (Forret, 1996). Matching of mentor and mentee needs careful consideration and has been a frequent topic of research (Headlam-Wells et al., 2005). Women often like to seek advice and support from other women, who may have some shared understanding of the gendered experiences of the workplace, but there is little evidence to support matching mentors and protégés on the basis of birth characteristics (such as sex and ethnicity), and it

may be better to try and match what the protégé needs with what the mentor can provide (Blake-Bear et al., 2011). Women may benefit from a female mentor in terms of role-modelling, but gender of mentor or protégé has been found to have little effect on the overall mentoring relationship (Burke et al., 2006; Fowler et al., 2007). Where men do appear to benefit more from mentoring is in relation to career advancement and progression – men are more likely to be actively sponsored by their mentor and to gain promotion (Ibarra et al., 2010). For maximum benefit to women, therefore, programmes need to be carefully designed to support and enable female protégés, and overcome gendered barriers to career advancement.

De Vries et al. (2006) argue that female mentoring programmes, as with women's leadership programmes more broadly, may inadvertently help reinforce gender inequality in organisations. Although these programmes aim to counter discrimination, provide women with access to seemingly-impenetrable networks and support their career development, by framing women as 'the problem' to be fixed they may marginalise women further. Mentoring programmes that aim to 'equip' women to cope better in male-dominated contexts do little to challenge the underlying structures, cultures and practices that sustain gender inequality in organisations. Therefore, although formal mentoring programmes, like the one discussed in this paper, have potential to be empowering, even transformative for individual women, they also carry risk in relation to identifying women as in need of additional support and thus as less capable in business contexts, while leaving wider gender inequalities largely unacknowledged and unchallenged (Dashper, In press).

Case study and methods

This paper is based on a case study of a formal women's mentoring programme within the events industry. The mentoring programme is based on two important propositions: first, that the events industry is characterised by gender inequality that limits the potential of many women to succeed in high level management and leadership positions; and second, that focused interventions are needed to remedy this. The mentoring programme is one such initiative that explicitly acknowledges gender inequality and the barriers women continue to face in the workplace. The mentoring programme is unusual in that it is an industry-wide initiative and not confined to one organisation. Designed, developed and driven by a prominent woman within the industry, the programme is open to women from across the sector and at different stages of their careers, who apply online to take part in this programme, which is free to mentees, and supported by the voluntary participation of mentors. Protégés are, therefore, paired with a mentor who does not have a direct stake in their career, opening up possibilities for frank and open discussions beyond organisational politics. The programme has been carefully designed, planned and managed, with input from a professional coach, to try and support and guide mentors and mentees over the course of a year to set goals, and work towards their achievement.

The programme lasts for one year, during which time mentors and mentees meet (in person, by phone or Skype) for two hours a month to work towards individual and clearly articulated goals. Mentors are supported by the mentor coach, and provided with resources to help them

guide their protégés and ensure, as far as possible, a consistent experience for mentees. All participants were invited to a launch celebration at the beginning of the programme, at which time the aims of the initiative were articulated and the participants publicly welcomed onto the programme. Over the course of the year, in addition to the one-to-one meetings, participants attended two one-day workshops, focused on different development topics, took part in a group activity and attended a final graduation, at which other industry representatives, press and mentors celebrated the achievements of the mentees over the course of the year. The programme was thus highly structured and mentor-mentee relationships carefully monitored. This was to try to avoid some of the problems identified in the literature where mentoring relationships breakdown due to unrealistic expectations, lack of expertise and lack of commitment on the part of mentor and/or mentee.

The research took place over the full year of the programme. I attended the face to face events, and made notes from my observations and informal conversations with participants. Participants were aware of my role from the outset, and of the voluntary nature of the research. In accordance with Leeds Beckett University ethics guidelines, all participants could agree to take part or not in any aspect of the programme, and could withdraw at any stage. The programme consisted of 15 mentees paired with 15 mentors. Participants were also interviewed three times over the course of the programme in order to track changes in their attitudes and experiences: the first interview took place in the first two months of the programme, the second in month 6 or 7, and the third in the final month, or just after the programme finished. I interviewed nine of the mentors three times, one twice, and three on one occasion. I also interviewed the mentor coach, who designed the programme and supported the mentors, on one occasion, resulting in a total of 71 interviews. Interviews lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, and were conducted mostly by phone, although I had already met with all participants face to face at one of the development days prior to the interviews. Topics for discussion varied dependent on stage of the programme, and whether it involved mentor or mentee, but focused on individual experiences of the programme, development, and challenges. Interviews were transcribed in full and thematically coded for analysis. In this paper I draw on the 37 interviews conducted with mentees in order to consider if and how the programme helped them in their career development. The mentees on the programme ranged from recent university graduates, to middle management and those seeking to break through into senior management, and included three business owners, with ages ranging from 22 to 45. Pseudonyms have been used and identifying details removed to protect anonymity.

Findings

Mentees were interviewed three times over the course of the year in order to track progress and assess if and how participation on the programme affected their confidence, attitudes, ambition, behaviours, and career paths. By speaking to the women at three different points it was apparent that all participants benefited from their involvement in the programme, although the types of benefit, and the significance of this in the individual career, varied considerably. Involvement in the programme required all participants to set aside time dedicated to their own personal and professional development, and this in itself can be rewarding but difficult to achieve in day-to-day professional life. Although the efficacy of

individual mentor-mentee relationships varied, just having access to a senior figure to discuss issues and gain feedback was useful for all mentees involved in the programme. The following sections are based on analysis of all 37 mentee interview transcripts. Three key themes emerged from analysis: confidence, goal-setting and career planning; and networking. Examples given reflect the broad consensus of participants in the programme

Confidence

To secure a place on the programme, protégés had to complete an application form and take part in an interview. From this early stage, and all the way through the programme, confidence (or lack of) was the most commonly identified development need. Research shows that women exhibit lower self-confidence than men in business and entrepreneurial contexts (Kirkwood, 2009). Many of the development activities focused around building confidence in business settings, and almost all mentees identified improved self-confidence as one of their goals for the programme. By the end of the year, improved confidence was reported by all, and came across in interviews by the change in the ways that mentees spoke about themselves and their achievements.

Lucy entered the programme with very low self-confidence. In the initial interview she explained:

I applied because I wanted to improve my presentation skills and overcome my nervousness ... I just really felt [the programme] would help me to become a more confident person and it would encourage me to then be able to take the next step, because I didn't feel so confident. And already after having had my first meeting with my mentor I've done little stuff, little tasks that I wouldn't have thought of doing before, so already that will start me on the next step.

Each time I spoke to Lucy, or met her at an event, she was more confident in talking about herself and her abilities. In the second interview she explained how participation on the programme and the advice and support of her mentor was helping her push herself to do things she would have avoided previously:

Having [mentor] has really helped me, it's built my confidence, which was one main issue I wanted to address ... I've been doing more presentations to the whole team and stepping up and doing it to heads of different departments as well, and I had a meeting with overall heads and they invited another venue in and I had to do a presentation for that and I would never have done that, and my manager trusted me that I would be able to do it, and it went fine, and I feel that I'm less nervous compared to how I used to be.

For Lucy, improvement in self-confidence was demonstrated through her willingness to present in front of others. The realisation that her manager trusted her as a professional to be able to deliver in front of outside partners boosted her self-belief further, and she attributed much of this to her involvement on the programme. By the final interview her confidence had grown to the extent that she was prepared to talk in front of the board of her company:

I feel that my confidence has really grown, with the help of my mentor and everything, I feel more sure of myself and I have seen a change and I think other

people who I work with have seen a change too, so that is really positive, it's been really good. And I've found that stuff that I'm now doing I would never have done before [the programme], so for example, speaking up more in important meetings rather than just sat there quietly, and I think the way I come across as well.

Importantly for Lucy the improvements in her self-confidence and associated changes in her behaviour at work were being noticed by her colleagues, including senior figures who have the capacity to help her progress in her career:

I've been asked by the head of commercial operations to present to the board in June and normally that's only heads of department that do that, and that's rare even for heads to do, but she feels confident that I'm able to do it ... I do feel nervous about doing it but looking back to how I would have been last year, before the programme, I would have been a complete state whereas now I'm taking it more on the chin, I'm like, ok, yeah, I've just got to do this.

Lucy was able to attribute the increase in her self-confidence and improvements in self-presentation directly to the support she received from her mentor:

I think what's really helped is just the tips and advice that [mentor] has given me, and she's really invested a lot of time and support, and I think from that she helped build on my confidence. She gave me a book to read which was really interesting, it was all about public speaking and confidence and things, so she's been amazing.

Lucy did appear to undergo a transformation over the course of the year-long programme, from a quiet, timid young woman who shied away from speaking in front of others to a seemingly confident speaker, comfortable on stage in front of a room of 200 industry leaders at the final graduation event. Having the support and attention of her mentor was essential, and Lucy herself was committed to overcoming her anxieties and presenting a more confident persona.

Abi also highlighted improved confidence as one of her key outcomes from participating in the programme:

I feel more confident in my ability to have a presence in meetings. I've gradually been attending quite high level board meetings where I need to host a meeting and project ideas that I've brought to the table and if someone said last year that I would have done that, I just wouldn't have believed it. But it's having the confidence that what you're saying is right, and if you're passionate about it, and now I've got to the stage where I do sit in meetings and you realise people do just voice up for the sake of talking, and that's what a lot of the meetings are about in my organisation, and it's not being afraid of that. I used to just sit in meetings and not say a word, but now I do, and I notice that it gets better as you go on.

For Abi, as with Lucy and several of the other mentees, an important manifestation of her increased self-confidence was her willingness to speak up in meetings and put her ideas forward. This is an important aspect of team-working, and essential to being seen as a (potential) leader. The mentoring programme, including the one-to-one support and the group

development days, really concentrated on trying to improve protégés' self-confidence in terms of speaking up, presenting themselves and their ideas, and by the end of the programme all mentees were able to identify this as an important achieved outcome.

Confidence is not only about speaking in front of other people. Nadia also mentioned confidence as a key outcome of her involvement in the programme, but this was not about self-presentation but about having conviction in her own abilities to take the next step in her career:

For me, it's really given me the confidence and sort of a push to do the jump from [organisation] and set up on my own. I wasn't sure whether I had enough experience or if I'd be able to do it and succeed and [mentor] really gave me the confidence to feel like I would and like I should and I feel like I might not have done it as quickly as I did do it if it wasn't for [mentor] pushing me.

By the end of the programme Nadia had set up a new business with a partner, and the mentoring programme had provided her with support to do this:

The one-to-one support from [mentor] has just been brilliant, I've really appreciated it and it's just that boost in confidence that we can do things and we can move forward and we can make that jump and it's not going to be the worst thing in the world and it won't fail instantly and all of that, so yeah, it's just been all of that experience that's been brilliant.

Confidence was identified at the outset of the programme as the key development need for the mentees, and targeted initiatives were put in place to achieve this through the one-to-one mentoring and the group development days. All mentees reported improved confidence by the end, and this was manifest in their behaviours in work and in how they presented themselves. Confidence is a broad concept and the programme was flexible enough to support more junior women like Lucy to feel brave enough to speak up in meetings, and more senior women like Nadia to make a career leap. Improving confidence was a strong achievement of the programme.

Career planning and goal setting

Individuals who set goals and actively plan their careers have the greatest likelihood for productive and satisfying careers (Greenhaus et al., 1995). The changing nature of work, with increased precariousness, shows the importance of flexibility and adaptability, but traditional notions of planning remain important for career development (Lent, 2013). The mentor programme in this study placed strong emphasis on career planning and goal setting. Working with their mentors, who in turn were supported by the mentor coach, protégés set goals for the year-long programme, and a 'stretch goal' which may be realised over a longer time period. For many mentees this was the first time they had set explicit career goals, and some found this one of the most challenging aspects of the programme.

Andrea had never before set goals for her career development. She explained that prior to joining the programme, she had 'job hopped', not staying in any one position for more than 18 months. This is a common stereotype of millennials, who are perceived to have lower job commitment than older generations (Meister, 2012). Moving jobs can be an avenue to career

progression, but can also make an individual seem unfocused and unreliable. Before the programme Andrea had never thought about why she kept changing jobs, but this became a major focus of her sessions with her mentor:

We talked about it a lot and we tried to narrow down the reason why I kept feeling like I should leave and we came up with a game plan of, right, so where do you want to be in five years, and 10 years, and how does that make a difference to what you're doing now?

Andrea had never thought in a targeted way about her career path:

I mean I know what I want to do in the long run but I've never planned out, right, this is what I'm going to do this year and this is what I'm going to do in the next five years. I've never done a timeline or thought this is where I want to be so this is what I've got to do, I'd never done that before.

Andrea found making such plans useful and recognised how planning gave her more confidence in herself and her work, as she reflected at the end of the programme:

I think the main thing for me is that I'm a lot more confident in myself, and I do put that down to having the chats with [mentor] and just setting goals for myself, because a lot of the time I was less confident when I was less sure about what was going to happen, so being able to sit down and set those goals and have a game plan, definitely it's helped a lot.

Lisa also found the goal-setting aspect of the programme important in giving her the time, focus and guidance to really think about her career and what she wanted to achieve. In the first interview she explained:

I've been at my company for a good amount of time and I've been making the most of opportunities that I've been given but I'd say I've probably just been going with the flow to a certain extent and I haven't shaken anything up ... I felt now was a really good time, at my age and in my point in my career, to just look at things with a bit more of an overview perspective and really start to try and challenge the direction that I might want to take ... I don't necessarily know what the next step will be so for me the scheme is a really good opportunity to start thinking about that and working out how I can get there.

Lisa is an ambitious woman, but had never sat down and actively planned out her career and engaged in targeted goal-setting. Reflecting on doing this with her mentor she explained:

I always knew that there was going to have to be some kind of shift as to how I was going to make the next move and go forward with my professional skills but this was definitely the first time that I was asked to really think about those goals.

Lisa, and many of the other mentees, found the goal-setting aspect of the programme challenging, but with the support of her mentor was able to take time to reflect on herself, her goals and aspirations, and by the end of the programme had a much clearer vision of how she wanted to develop:

I have made leaps and bounds in terms of my confidence and I think I just understand what kind of, I know it probably sounds a bit naff, but what kind of

career woman I want to be and how I want to represent myself in the industry ... I think I'm a lot clearer in terms of thinking about the next few months ahead, or even the next year ahead.

Being part of a formal programme, with a commitment to meet with their mentors for a minimum of two hours a month, and to produce a log book and engage with other development activities, required mentees to take the time and space to really think about their careers and how they want to develop professionally. With the support of their mentor, who was not their boss and so had no direct stake in their career development, they were all able to set some goals to guide them in the short and medium term. Renn et al. (2014) found that women benefit more than men from a mentor to support them in their career planning, and the female mentees on this programme developed important skills in goal-setting with the support of their experienced mentors.

Networking

The third key area of development for the protégés on the mentoring programme was networking. Networking is an important business skill, but networks are often gendered, to the detriment of women (Benschop, 2009; Berger et al., 2015). Strong networks are believed to be particularly important in the events industry, where jobs and opportunities are often filled via word-of-mouth recommendations. For many mentees, widening their network was a key goal of participation on the programme, as Emily explained:

Basically I don't really have a network, an events network, other than my previous boss, because I've only ever worked for the company where I am now in the operational sense of events so I've only got one, if you like, peer, so I wanted to expand my network and have someone who is in the industry but outside of my company who I can speak to and gain guidance from.

Having a mentor who does not work in the same company is an usual feature of this formal mentoring programme, as most similar initiatives are in-house operations. This industry-wide programme pairs mentees with a senior figure from outside their organisation, bringing benefits in terms of goal-setting, as mentioned above, but also in relation to network-building, by providing mentees with access to a senior figure they may not otherwise come into contact with. Emily found the programme was effective in helping her expand her events network:

I didn't really have any contacts in the events industry so through the programme I've met a bunch of mentors, a bunch of mentees, I've gone to some other events as well because I've kind of in a way put myself out there and thought if I go to an event I must speak to one person, even if they go 'oh right, sure' and walk away, at least I've said something to somebody and tried to have a conversation.

Emily's lack of confidence comes through in this quote, as she doubts her ability to present herself as interesting and worth connecting with, yet her experiences on the programme have helped her overcome this to some extent, as she still is willing to introduce herself to strangers, and understands the importance of actively expanding her networks.

Sam also found participation on the programme a great way of expanding her network, which was limited as she was at the beginning of her career. Through the programme Sam was

exposed to senior figures in the events industry in a way that she may not have been able to achieve otherwise at this stage in her career:

For me one of the key things has been the amount my network has expanded drastically from being on the scheme, because I was just starting out so I didn't really know many people in the industry. I'd joined a few societies, but you know, events management is all about who you know, so the people that I've met along this journey that I've added to my connections that will be in my phonebook or my LinkedIn now, that's very important, and I'm noticing it now because I'm getting people contacting me saying 'oh I met you the other day' or 'I met you a couple of months back and we've got a job coming up, are you available'? And that's all knock-on effects from people I've met on the scheme and that's going to have long-term benefits.

Exposure to their mentor opens up exposure to their mentor's networks, and participation on a formal programme opens up access to other mentors and mentees as well. Given the high profile of the founding entrepreneur and widespread media interest in the scheme, participants all gained wide exposure to help expand their networks.

This is a women's mentoring programme, with explicit goals to support women and work against persistent gender inequality in the events industry, and Maya identified the empowering aspect of women supporting each other as a positive networking outcome:

I appreciate the network of other women who have similar challenges to me, and I think that's a big thing. Obviously I'll keep the relationship going with [mentor] in terms of keeping in contact, but day-to-day I'm in contact with this great group of women [the mentees], which is really empowering, and that will help in the future with contacts.

The design of the programme facilitated networking opportunities for the mentees and all identified this as a positive outcome to increase their exposure and visibility in the events industry and to help them feel supported and empowered in their own careers.

Discussion

The events industry is still affected by gender inequality, with women often struggling to make it to senior leadership positions in a sector characterised by long hours and frequent travel (Dashper, 2013). The mentoring programme discussed in this paper calls explicit attention to this, and has provoked widespread debate in industry circles and media. This in itself is an important outcome of the programme, as putting gender inequality on the agenda is a key step to tackling discrimination. However, simply debating gender issues will not solve these problems and the mentoring programme is a targeted initiative to try to support, develop and empower a number of women in their event careers. Mentoring has been shown to assist women (and men) in their career development (Bozionelos et al., 2016). For the

protégés on this programme, mentoring was a positive experience in their career development.

Benefits to mentees were concentrated in three key areas: confidence, career planning and goal setting, and networking. All mentees felt that their involvement in the mentoring programme helped them feel more confident in their professional lives. This was manifest through their willingness to speak up more in meetings, put their ideas forward and present with confidence to senior management. Confidence was also important in terms of encouraging mentees to take the next step in their careers, be that in relation to applying for a promotion or setting up a new business. Having access to a mentor to coach and support them helped improve protégé self-belief, and targeted development activities through group meetings and activities further enhanced self-confidence. This was a clear beneficial outcome for all mentees, and the careful design, implementation and monitoring of this formal mentoring programme helped ensure that mentees' sense of self-assuredness improved, inspiring them to feel braver and bolder in their professional lives. The programme also required mentees to develop goals and engage in career planning, an activity many had not previously undertaken. This was a key aspect in helping to improve confidence, as having a clearer idea about what they want to achieve and how they might go about doing that inspired several protégés to believe more in their own abilities. The support of a mentor was invaluable in goal setting for many mentees, who struggled with this aspect of the programme and turned to their mentor for guidance and support. By the end all had set goals, and many acknowledged that goal-setting would remain an important aspect of their professional planning after the programme ended, as they could see the benefits of being targeted and strategic in their approach to development. The third key outcome from the programme was the networking opportunities provided, and all protégés left with an enhanced events-related network. In an industry where much business is done through personal contacts, this was invaluable for all and especially those in the early stages of their event careers, and consequently with a limited professional network. Again, the structured design of the mentoring programme helped maximise networking opportunities and benefits, as protégés had access not only to their own mentor and their contacts but, through the formal group activities and workshops, those of the other mentors and the mentees as well. Given that research illustrates the disadvantages women often experience in relation to professional networking, this was an important outcome of this mentoring programme for the mentees (Benschop, 2009; Berger et al., 2015).

The mentoring programme clearly had positive outcomes for the mentees involved. This paper has focused on three key areas, but individual protégés also benefited from their participation on the programme in other ways, consistent with their personal needs and situation. The research assessed the beneficial outcomes for mentees during and immediately following the end of the programme, and further research will be needed to assess the extent to which these experiences translate into improved career opportunities for the participants. The mentoring programme is designed to begin to address some aspects of persistent gender inequality in the events industry but, as discussed elsewhere (Dashper, In press), the programme is innovative in that the goals are to empower women as individual women, rather than to teach them to assimilate to masculine notions of success, such as formal leadership positions in industry. Therefore the improved self-confidence and ability to plan

and network successfully reported by all participants can be seen as successful outcomes for the programme, and for the individual mentees.

Mentee experiences on the programme were not always positive, and the method of conducting interviews at three stages on the programme showed a dip in positive attitudes in the middle, but negative experiences were rarely reported during interviews. All the mentees reported beneficial outcomes for their personal and professional development. The structure of the programme facilitated this, through setting out clear expectations and roles for mentors and mentees. The support of the mentor coach helped identify any problems in mentor-mentee relationships, and the provision of supporting materials provided a guide and template for face-to-face meetings and, specifically, goal setting. The group meetings provided further opportunities for development activities targeted at the needs of the cohort and supported the development of connections and networking opportunities. Without this level of structure and monitoring it is possible that the beneficial outcomes of the programme would have been less pronounced, and that at least some of the mentees may have struggled in handling the relationship with their mentor, many of whom occupy senior positions in the industry, with associated demands on their time and need for frequent travel.

Conclusions

The discussion in this article illustrates that such a formal mentoring programme can have positive outcomes for the women involved as protégés. This is important in supporting and empowering those individual women, who may then go on to share their learning and experiences in their own careers and leadership behaviours, leading to something of a trickle-down effect. This is a positive outcome, illustrating that such programmes have a role to play in combatting some of the persistent gender inequality in the events industry, possibly leading to a few more women reaching senior positions. However, such programmes are not without risk and limitations. In identifying women as in need of an explicit initiative to ‘help’ them reach senior roles, women’s mentoring programmes may marginalise women further, singling women out as a problem in need of assistance, and distancing women from the masculine norm of the successful leader (de Vries, 2006). Even carefully designed and managed programmes, like the one discussed in this paper, carry this risk as a few outspoken and negative responses to its women-only focus from industry leaders, reported in the events media, illustrate. However, the significant benefits to the protégés, as discussed here, go some way to combatting these few but vocal dissenters. The mentoring programme was a positive experience for all the mentees and all reported beneficial outcomes from their involvement in the programme by the end of the year, including promotions, new jobs and businesses, and improved work performance. This is important for those women, and their peers, but does little to challenge the broader structures and beliefs that sustain gender inequality in the events industry. Mentoring programmes may empower individual women, but more deep-rooted problems associated with the nature of work in the industry remain unchallenged. Many roles in the events industry are not family-friendly, requiring long and inflexible hours and frequent travel (Dashper, 2013). Expectations about men’s and women’s roles within and beyond the workplace continue to limit what individuals can achieve when trying to balance work and family, or in relation to the traits and behaviours of ‘good’ leadership (Heilman, 2001; Friedman, 2015). Until these and other structural, cultural, social and economic barriers

are dismantled then it is unlikely that gender discrimination will disappear completely from the events industry, and it is probable that women will continue to be underrepresented at senior management and board level (Dashper, In press). Mentoring programmes, like the one discussed in this paper, do not address these broader and difficult-to-challenge aspects of gender inequality, but remain important initiatives in supporting and enabling the personal and professional development of individual women in the events industry.

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